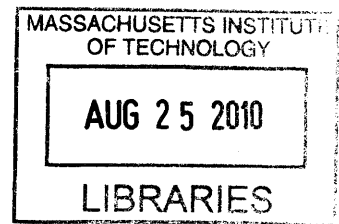


Critical Play: Alien Contact

By

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BFA in Graphic Design
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Critical Play: Alien Contact

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture
on August 16, 2010 in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Science Master in Visual Studies

ABSTRACT

I argue that the necessity of emancipating the Situationist International (SI) from the historical notion of it as the last movement of the avant-garde in order to take over the spirit of the SI. I claim that necessity of strategically announcing the concept of the Post-Situationist in order to interrupt existing perceptions of the SI.

I propose “play” as a major direction in revitalizing the aesthetic sensibility of dehumanized citizens who live in the “spectacle”, as defined as the Situationists, of capitalist society. I also propose to reinvent humanized daily life based on studying French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s aesthetical politics and Marxist theorist Guy Debord’s theories on spectacle.

Simultaneously, I investigate “critical play” as my central tactic in reconnecting social neurons among atomized citizens to re-energize human creativity, a core agent in progressing social development. Lastly, I demonstrate one of my research projects performed over the last two years in the program in Art, Culture, and Technology. In terms of critical play, I am seeking the potentiality of Post Situationist strategies.

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1. Introduction

Capitalism, claiming to stand for the right of private property and free market, has been rapidly expanding since many socialist countries collapsed after the dissolution of the USSR in 1990. Art and socio-political practice are inseparable so that dominant capitalist ideas in contemporary society tremendously influence the idea of art. “What is the role of art in this dominant capitalist era?” this question initiated the motivation for my thesis. I began exploring this question by analyzing the role of art in both socialist and capitalist societies. These inquiries revealed that the ruling classes often appropriate art to enforce and maintain their own ideology dominance in their respective social structures. In capitalist society we often see the selling of “cultural products” as contemporary art. This political and fetishistic concept of “art” results in making citizens alienated from art. In socialist societies we see the well-documented use of art as propaganda.

After this surface examination, a more compelling direction arose: “What potential does art have in advancing civic society, within these contemporary frameworks of these commercialized and demagogic art worlds?” Giving light to this question are the works of the Situationists International (SI), whose philosophy and strategies insisted in recreating everyday life as an escape from “the society of the spectacle” (Debord, 1995). In past and contemporary theory, the SI have been historicized as the last movement of the artistic avant-garde. Where these claims insinuates the actions of the SI are a moment in time that has ended, I see the SI as a starting point and laying the groundwork for what can be potentially realized. There now becomes a necessity of emancipating the Situationist International from these historicized statements and strategically announcing

the concept of the “Post-Situationist” as a way of uprooting these pre-established ideas of the Situationist International. Additionally, I propose that French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic and politic theory supports this Post-Situationist development and offers new strategies for the present day. His approach empowers the Post-Situationist idea to overcome the intellectual elitism of the Situationist International who positioned themselves an agent for social change in 1960s, which inevitably resulted in the declarative social spectacle that they desperately resisted.

To find practical strategy for the Post-Situationist, I propose, “play” as a major direction in revitalizing the aesthetic sensibility of dehumanized citizens who live in the spectacle of capitalist society. I also propose to reinvent humanized daily life based on studying French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s aesthetical politics and Marxist theorist Guy Debord’s theories on spectacle.

Simultaneously, I investigate “critical play” as my central tactic in reconnecting social neurons among atomized citizens to re-energize human creativity, a core agent in progressing social development. Lastly, I demonstrate one of my research projects performed over the last two years in the Program in Art, Culture, and Technology. In terms of critical play, I am seeking the potentiality of the Post Situationist strategies.

2. Background

2.1. The Role of Art after the French Revolution

In the middle age, scholars and art historians insist that art had a role in strengthening ruling classes' authority and power, extolling their greatness and nobility in words, songs, or pictures. A good example is the fact that it is rare to find artworks praising the lower class in contrast to the many portraits depicting the elegance of the aristocracy or the holiness of the pope.



Fig 1 David, Jacques Louis. *The Tennis Court Oath*. 1789-91. Musée national du Château de Versailles, France

The French Revolution is an important historical event with its massive impact on improving the right of citizens and the collapse of the feudal system; however, the central agents, leading the revolution were ultimately aimed at monopolizing finance, although initially perceived as fighting to improve citizen conditions. Although the French

Revolution was impossible without citizens' support, the fruit takers from the revolution were bourgeois. The bourgeois government after the revolution transformed art from social decorations to a means of idealizing the image of the bourgeois coup. For example, Arnold Hauser in his book *The Social History of Art, Vol. 3: Rococo, Classicism and Romanticism*, contents that French painter Jacques-Louis David, a representative artist for the government, advertised the grandeur and righteousness of revolution (see fig. 1), borrowing Roman style suitable for expressing heroic and patriotic ideal. (Hauser, Ch5)

A Korean aesthetician Soon-rae Lee in her book *Art, create the West* published in 2009 claims that bourgeois often borrow various pieces of art from the ruling classes of the past, ranging from the remains of rulers in ancient civilization to aristocratic decorations in the luxurious palaces in order to demonstrate and establish a culture of power. This gesture alludes to the fact that the bourgeois class revolves around gaining aristocratic authority and becoming the new privileged class, not advancing civil society. Lee argues that during the Enlightenment period, human reason was accountable for removing a king's or priest's authority and holiness, in which aided in destroying feudal ruling system. At this time the newly emerging bourgeois made practical use of this reasoning power to maximize commercial profits for themselves. Throughout this transfer of power, Lee claims that the role of the citizen in the "reason" era gradually became compartmentalized in the new social system, through the bourgeois' manipulation and dominance of these new ideas of reason and science. This ownership of ideas promoted by the bourgeois lead to the extermination of anything holy or god-given from the past. In this newly capitalized society, people needed to find an alternative way to fill the

suddenly void sense of soul and emotion. Instead of turning to religion, the bourgeois offered art for a suitable balance between substance and soul. Although the major promise of art as a new sanctuary, was offered as healing citizen's inner emptiness, it was actually controlled by this new ruling class to kept people distanced from social realities, and forbid it becoming available for political intervention as religion did in the past. (Lee, 2009)



Fig. 2. Louvre Museum, "Photo:louvre inside"; photoeverywhere.co.uk, Web; 10 Aug. 2010

Following this transformation of culture lead to a high demand for soul remedy inspired capitalists to develop new businesses promoting bourgeois' nobility and selling various cultural therapeutic products. People became enthusiastic when these products were mysterious and abstract, keeping distant from the reason dominant realities. (fig. 2) It became ironic that the bourgeois support of mystery in art was so in contrast with the fact

they had previously criticized the obscure nature of religion in the name of reason. In this reason-dominant society, art became an authorized commodity, providing therapeutic remedies to citizen who thirsts for soul.

2.2. The Role of Art after the Russian Revolution

Ever since the Revolution in 1917, throughout Russia, the first socialist country of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), the role of art in socialistic society has been enthusiastically argued. Marxist aesthetician John, Ehrhard in his book *Problem on Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics* elaborates on art's unique ability to reflect and expose a range of particularities of the human condition. He writes, just as science can be understood as one of the particular and necessary perspectives in describing the human condition, art also carries with it a necessary ability to explain other individual characteristics that science can't describe. He writes that multi-dimensional perspectives such as science, art, and religion are required to understand the complexities of the social condition, therefore art is valued as providing this unique perspective to society. (Ehrhard, Ch1, 2) As Ehrhard outlines the particularity of art, he becomes more specific and elaborates that art exposes the individuality of social personality, where science, contributes to understanding the universality of it. In short, socialist society regards art as the particular capacity to find out the individual characteristics of social human. (Ehrhard, Ch3)

This view of art was prevalent, however, there was also a growing gap between socialist art practice and theory. Leaders throughout the USSR often regarded art as one of the elements for a social construction and consequently searched for a socially applicable

usage of art. For example, art played an important role in educating and promoting socialist idealism, similar to that of the French bourgeois in regards to art as propaganda. This politically utilized art form inevitably resulted in aiding the formation of the soviet bureaucratic system. Film art in Russia is example of the gap between practice and the idealism of socialist society. This new art medium, of the 1920s, was revealed and had the potential to become a new art form since it didn't have any ties to the past. Although as we can see from examples like *The Battleship Potemkin* directed by Sergei Eisenstein, the art form quickly began to incorporating and promoting socialist ideas. With this film, it was shown that the medium is a very effective means to promote ideology and to educate people, leading to identify film making predominantly as a political tool in the USSR.(fig. 3)



Fig. 3. *The Battleship Potemkin*, Dir Sergei Eisenstein. Mosfilm, 1925. Film

3. The Situationist and The Post Situationist

3.1 The Situationist International

“What potential does art have in advancing civic society, within the cotemporary frameworks of the commercialized and demagogic art worlds?” Giving light to this question are the works of the Situationists International (SI), whose philosophy and strategies insisted in recreating everyday life as an escape from “the society of the spectacle” (Debord, 1995)

In the 1960s, the New Left movement expanded upon previous Marxist theories, which mainly focused on class struggles, hegemony issues, and other aspects of capitalized daily life and culture. After the Second World War, the New Left movement which emerged in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, criticized not only authoritarianism and bureaucracy in capitalist and socialist societies around the world, but also issues of alienation, sexual inequality, and antinuclear sentiments. The New Leftists expanded the idea of proletarian, including students and labors, believing that young intellectuals are important agencies for social change.

This New Left movement hugely influenced the Situationist International, founded by theorist Guy Debord and artist Asger Jorn. The Situationist International supported New French sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s critique of commercialized and capitalized life and regarded daily life as a battlefield to emancipate the alienation of human being within society. (Lefebvre, 2008) The Situationist International focused on creating “humanized”

daily life by constructing situations for the fulfillment of human primitive desires.

In *The Spectacle of the Society* written by Guy Debord in 1967, Debord argued that the accumulation of the social spectacle represents and colonizes the human life. The spectacle creates the social connection mediated by the accumulated images between people and interrupting the true relationship. Capitalist society, which can be sustained by generating pseudo-desires to manipulate endless growth, consequently produces the mixed spectacle with production and consumption. The Situationist International strategies were to reinvent daily situations and conditions to escape from the pseudo realities.(Debord, 1995)

For example, “detournement” was the SI critical approach to appropriate cultures and manners to subvert this “society of spectacle.”(Debord 1995) The main characteristic of their strategies aimed at cultural resistance rather than political. These characteristics may have provided historians clues to what has become the history of the SI in art. However, the SI didn’t distinguish politic with art and strategically used cultural critics to subvert the image-fulfilled conditions in the advanced capitalism. Indeed, the SI’s cultural strategies originated from several factors; the dominant culture of seeing that Historian and critical theorist Martin Jay insists affected the SI. (Jay 1993) In addition to it, Marxist and Frankfurt School scholar, Herbert Marcuse’s theories that looked at the poetic and artistic language as a new and revolutionary way influenced on the SI. (Marcuse 1967) ¹

¹ Marxist and Frankfurt School scholar Herbert Marcuse looked at the poetic and artistic language as a new and revolutionary language since the 1930s and understood that the art implied the idea of imagination’s ability to transcend and destruct the existing authoritative system of *one-dimensional society* (Marcuse, 1967). He considered the imagination as the language of

We can assume that the SI developed the artistic strategies as a revolutionary way to fight against the spectacle in the dominant culture of seeing.

3.2 The Post Situationist

It could limit our understanding of the SI to frame their philosophy and practice in the particular perspective such as art, architecture, and cultural critique. We especially need to pay particular attention to historians supporting bourgeois ideas of art trying to describe the SI movement as the terminal station of the artistic avant-garde. This approach can invalidate the SI's rejection of an art separated from life and politics, capturing their movements as one of art trends and announcing the completion of art avant-garde in the early twenty-century. The fact the SI are historicized can be interpreted as a failure since their strategies were turned into corporate art. It also can testify that their radical challenging for shaking the society of spectacle to re-create daily life is almost impossible; however, there are no reason to see that the SI movement as the last stage of avant-garde. To reinvigorate the subversive questioning of the SI from historicization requires a repositioning the SI in history. The advent of the SI should be understood as the accumulated exploration of social revolutionary in the human history, not just an art trend. In this perspective, the SI movement can be perceived as the unavoidable historical event that was born from the need for social change. In addition, the short existence of the SI (from 1953 to 1972) should be reframed as an initiator for attacking the premise of

challenge and resistance. Art is a language of discovery that enables sensitivity to the implied vision of a thing, disarming the repressive force to see things as familiar. In order for art to function as the language of discovering the implied vision, art has to destruct the senselessness and revive the sensibility that was repressed by the automatism of perception in the industrial age. Art cannot achieve the social change solely by itself; however, art implies its ability of provocation and initiator to revive the sensibility which would ultimately realize the social change.

the dehumanized society, playing an implicit role in initiating the May 1968 Revolution. (fig. 4) The dissolution of the SI after exposing the true face of modern daily life started the engine to emancipate the capitalized and dehumanized everyday life, from which we entered a new stage, ending art separated from life and politics.

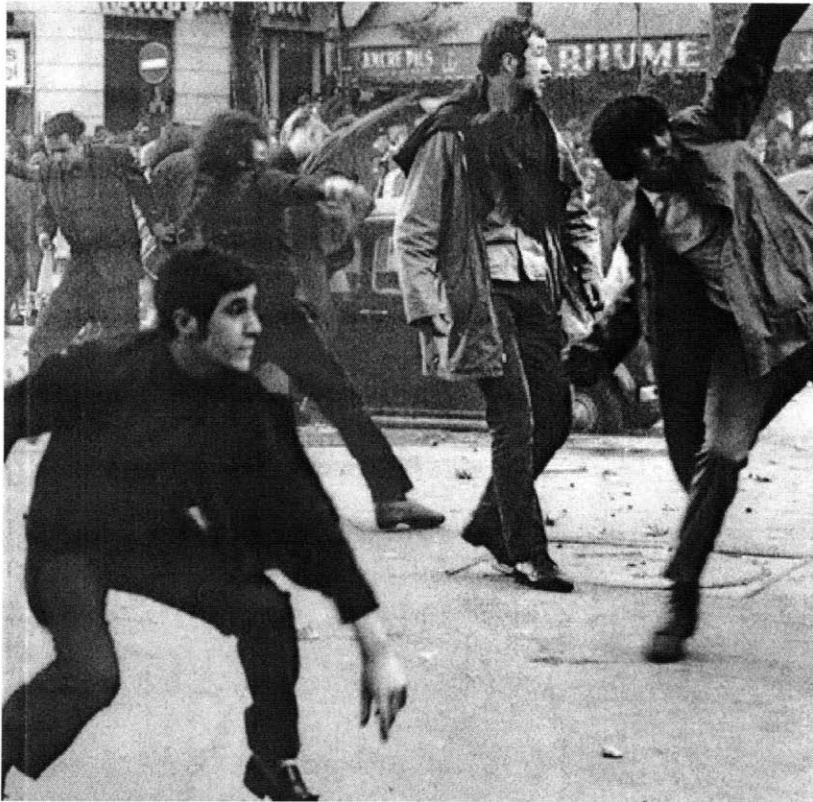


Fig. 4. *On the Passage of a few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1956-1972*, Dir Branka Bogdanov. 1989

Now becomes a necessity of emancipating the Situationist International from these historicized statements and strategically announcing the concept of the “Post-Situationist” as a way of uprooting these pre-established ideas of the Situationist International. The concept of the Post Situationist would be rejected by the SI itself, however I am using the term “Post-Situationalist” as a temporary placeholder so that we may give light to this issue at large. That said, the mission of this Post-Situationist idea is to reconnect the spirit of the SI of the past, to present moment without the distortion of its

meaning and to continue to develop new strategies to destabilize the advanced spectacle of capitalist society.

3.3 The Post Situationist and Jacques Rancière

It can sometimes be dangerous to believe that intellectuals are the only agents of change in society. The inherent danger of this type of thinking is that intellectuals can become the new-privileged class armed with a fulfilled faith of an actualized “social agent”. We only need look to the bourgeois of the 16 and 17th century, who possessed new forms of knowledge, playing a key role in constructing capitalist societies.

French Marxist philosopher Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic and political philosophy can provide Post-Situationist ideas buffers against the inherent dangers of intellectually driven social change. Rancière in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, claims that social order is actually a “police order” (Rancière, 89) determined by the distribution of roles in a community, and the order is, Rancière insists, established by “the distribution of the sensible”. (Rancière, 12) These established sets of perception determine what can be owned and cannot, what is visible and invisible and sets the division between inclusion and exclusion. Social order is a mechanism to maintain sets of perception to intensify division. Politics challenge the social order and rearranges the distribution of the sensible in order to make the invisible visible, the unseen seen. (Rancière, 2004)

More over, Rancière is skeptical that intellectuals can lead social change by only providing critical knowledge. For example, Rancière controversially criticized the belief that Marxists can contribute to social change, letting citizens know the truth of the concealed structure of social hegemony revealed by their scientific analysis of it. Rancière argues that this approach can intensify the mode of perception making people recognize their own social order without challenging it contrary to scientific Marxists' intentions. Rancière insists that social order is not constituted through knowledge, but through aesthetic derived from the senses connecting our body to social order. Therefore, emancipation from social order is a matter of reconfiguration of perception. (Rancière, 2004)

Rancière links politics to aesthetics in the matter of the distribution of sensible. He claims that art moves forward to "the aesthetic regime of art", (Rancière, 81) a free play form of sensible after "the representative regime of art" (Rancière, 91), which supports the social order. Aesthetics as free play can be a practical method to rearrange the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen, the audible and the inaudible, thus weakening pre-established social orders. Politics, according to Rancière, is to make the condition of the unstable distribution of the sensible in society oppose stable distribution, which can enforce the unbreakable division among people and firms the social order. (Rancière, 2004)

To overcome the SI's intellectualism and its inherent dangers, the Post Situationist needs to find advanced methods to revive citizen's inborn aesthetic sense to change the spectacular condition of capitalism rather to instigate people. Rancière's aesthetic politics could give hints to the Post Situationist.

4. Critical Play

4.1. Critical Play

The promise of the Post Situationist is the belief that all people inherit an inner aesthetic potential for social change. All people who strive to revitalize their aesthetic sense, to emancipate themselves are Post Situationists. All Post Situationists have to strive to find a way or strategy to activate a hardened aesthetic sense. To find potential strategies of the Post Situationist, I examine “play” as a key strategy in revitalizing the aesthetic sensibility of dehumanized citizens in the capitalist society of spectacle, and to reinvent humanized daily life. Simultaneously, I investigate “critical play” as my central tactic in reconnecting social neurons among atomized citizens to re-energize human creativity, a core agent in progressing social development. Recovering an inner aesthetic sensibility can give citizens the power to destroy the insensitivity internalized by capitalist social structure. The increased sensibility of individuals can also increase social contact, conflict, and interference among people, consequently impacting social advancement. In other words, the aesthetic revitalization of the individual is not only personal activity, but social as well. For the Post Situationist, all efforts and attempts in reviving the human inner sense can be understood as artistic and political activities.

4.2. Critical Play: LAPD's 220 Glimpses of Utopia

The projects of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) founded by John Malpede in 1985, are good examples to convey the role of community-based art in terms of critical play. The LAPD, is a community space run by actors, activists, and writers, is located on Skid Row, the biggest homeless area in the world. Since 1985, John Malpede and LAPD have been leading countless performance workshops with Skid Row's community members: homeless people, an invisible, inaudible strangers in our social structure. With social activity groups such as the LA Community Action Network, LAPD has been using community-based performance workshop as a means of creating situations activating social debate about the problematic issues in Skid Row and making homeless people visible and speak in public.²

For example, in the "220 Glimpses of Utopia" project, LAPD asked over two hundred people on Skid Row what utopia looks like to them. After the interview, LAPD and the homeless people went to the street and stood at a regular distance to create a long line on the sidewalks from Skid Row to City Hall. The length of the line of people covered over ten blocks long at rush hour. At the same time, they translated their own utopia vision into slow physical movement like dance. The long line of these slow moving gestures represented their unified hopes of utopia in society. Compared to violent protests, this group aesthetic performance succeeded in creating alternative situation to convey people's hopes in Skid Row to the mayor of Los Angeles, simultaneously, revitalizing homeless people's inner sensibility.³ LAPD's 220 Glimpses of Utopia project shows the possibility

2 "About LAPD." *lapovertydept.org*, LAPD, n.d. Web 1 Aug. 2010

3 "UTOPIA/dystopia - 220glimpses." *lapovertydept.org*, LAPD, n.d. Web 1 Aug. 2010

of new social communications by using critical play, contributing to the merging of aesthetics and politics.

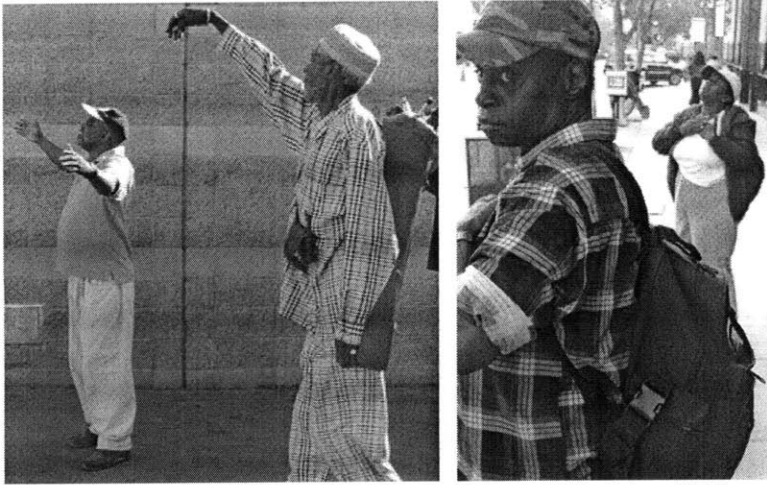


Fig. 5. “220 Glimpses of Utopia”; lapovertydept.org, Web; 1 Aug. 2010

4.3. Critical Play: Hit here if you feel victimized

Here, I re-frame one of my research projects performed over the last two years in the Program in Art, Culture, and Technology in terms of “critical play” in order to seek Post Situationist strategies.

Hit here if you feel victimized project performed in 2008 in Cambridge and Boston, the United States. The modified drum wearer (Jaekyung Jung & Sohin Hwang) roamed around from place to place such as the Boston Common, the historical place for speaking out, and Chinatown where immigrant populations reside. The public was invited and encouraged to hit the modified drum. Wearers performed a role in activating people who felt victimized to participate in play, revealing their inner pain in a public space. The sound of the drum symbolized the release of the inner pain and the act of hitting the drum became a healing ritual. During playing the game in the urban settings, the most of

participators (players) considered this interaction a simple game, not a serious political event, despite the use of the word “victimized” on the drum. However, when the playing happened, hitters had a chance to reveal their inner conditions to the public, which could be regarded as a political activity. From this perspective, this action can be interpreted as critical, revealing a sense of being victimized.



Fig. 6. Hit here if you feel victimized, Jaekyung Jung, Sohin Hwang. Performance. Boston, 2008

5. Conclusion

“What is the role of art in this capitalist era?” After investigating the social history of art and relevant areas, I conclude that the philosophy and strategies of the Situationist International, who insisted on recreating everyday life to escape from the spectacle society, shows potential in answering this question.

Firstly, I argue that the necessity of emancipating the Situationist International from the historical notion of it as the last movement of the avant garde in order to take over the spirit of the SI. I claim that necessity of strategically announcing the concept of the Post-Situationist in order to interrupt existing perceptions of the SI.

Secondly, I investigate Rancière’s aesthetic politics as a potential idea in overcoming the SI’s intellectualism and its inherent dangers. Based on Rancière’s theory, I formulate that 1) the promise of the Post Situationist is the belief that all people inherit inner aesthetic potentials for social change. 2) All people who strive to revitalize their aesthetic sense and emancipate them are Post Situationists. 3) For the Post Situationist, all efforts at reviving the human inner aesthetic sensibility can be understood as artistic and political activities. 4) The increased aesthetic sensibility of individuals also can increase social contact, conflict, and interference among people. Consequently, it can impact social advancement. In short, the aesthetic revitalization of individual is not only personal activity, but social as well.

Lastly, I propose “play” as a practical strategy in revitalizing the aesthetic sensibility of dehumanized citizens who live in the spectacle of capitalist society. Simultaneously, I investigate “critical play” as my central tactic in reconnecting social neurons among atomized citizens to re-energize human creativity, a core agent in progressing social development. Critical play performs both the revitalization of human senses. However, critical play role in building bridge, which must disappear after completing its mission, from the present unstable condition of humanized society to a more permanent for it. To develop critical play, recovering one’s sense of natural play in order to revitalize aesthetic sensibility still remains an important agenda, neutralizing the accustomed sense of social entertainment provided by capitalism.

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